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ABSTRACT

Ideally, the act of performance involves the whole body of the performer. The solo performer of any poem (defined broadly to include all types of literature) becomes the poem; the poem takes flesh in the form of the reader. In this situation, the reader gives the audience a close-up, in which small gestures and minimal movements assume massive importance. Teachers of performers have a difficult task: they must avoid the destruction of individualized patterns of movement which vitalize the poem, yet they must also provide the student formal exercises sufficient to make movement a conscious endeavor. (KS)

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Wallace A. Bacon

Every Little Meaning:
Expressive Movement in Interpretation

There is an American popular song which begins "Every little movement has a meaning all its own." In a recent television special, the song was used as the background music for a dance number, and it made its point well: every movement of each dancer's body did indeed seem meaningful. Nothing was without significance; nothing was wasted. The work had total form.

It occurred to me even at the time that one might very well rephrase the song as a goal for the oral performance of literature: "Every little meaning has a movement all its own." Ideally, the act of performance involves the whole body of the performer--and includes, I think, the spirit which moves that body. For interpretation is an act (and an art) of matching: matching of words and meanings, meanings and feelings, feelings and expressive states of the body. When the act is complete, all is one. The reader becomes the poem; the poem takes flesh in the form of the reader. There is a matching of inner forms and outer forms. And beyond this, in the performing situation, there is a matching process which occurs between each performer and each member of the listening and watching audience. The voice of the poem is never, in performance, a disembodied voice.

In the history of interpretation in the Western world, there has always been discussion of the nature and kinds of movement thought "proper" to the performer. Indeed, interpretation has sometimes been defined in terms of that movement; for some teachers, the actor moves but the interpreter does not; for some, the interpreter never characterizes but suggests, while for others the interpreter (who is always concerned with personae, including his own persona) must characterize--and characterizing is related to the degree and quality of movement.

Of late, in the United States, interpreters have been "permitted" much fuller use of movement. Doubtless this relaxation of definition has been related to the increasing interest in group performances of literature--in the media called Readers Theatre, Chamber Theatre,

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Interpreters Theatre, and so on. The lines between full theatrical presentation and these various media have been blurred, and are often felt to be insignificant. I do not wish, here, to enter into that discussion, but to limit myself to the solo performer, who remains for me the center of interest in teaching. I am concerned with the single reader and his poem (using poem broadly to cover all forms of literature).

Every reader moves, and must move. I have sometimes seen rules for interpretation which laid it down as a rule that interpreters must not move, but use only eyes and voice to perform. But that is a completely objectionable principle, since no living body uses only eyes and voice for any act. The body lives; life is itself movement, for it is made up of acts which have beginnings, middle, and ends. Indeed, the apparent motionlessness of the body in stasis is meaningful only when weighed against its usual movement. Stasis differs from rigor mortis in being a phase of movement, not its everlasting absence. The body poised for flight is highly tensive.

It is true, for me (though not for everyone, I think), that, in the solo performance of literature, movement is frequently best (most efficient, most telling) when it is minimal. And it is true that by and large the upper part of the torso is the most expressive part of the body in such performance. The solo performance gives us, in effect, a close-up, where each small gesture counts--where indeed every little meaning has a movement all its own.

This is not to say that the wholeness of the poem is left out of account. But the wholeness of the poem is best achieved by making significant each moment in the journey. And each moment is most significant when it is embodied in such a way that its movements are the movements which best serve the text.

The youthful performer, the inexperienced performer, is likely to give us random movements, tangential movements, movements which reflect his own bodily state but ignore the bodily state of the poem which it is his goal to match. Such movements may be eloquent, may be admirably instructive as to the state of the performer--but they may damage the poem. The expressive movements of stage fright are an

instance; personal mannerisms of which the performer may be completely unconscious are another instance. Or at a given moment in performance, the reader may notice that he has made an error in his text, and that momentary shift of consciousness from text to error may be made eloquently evident to the audience. Or he may be speaking one line while he is thinking ahead to a difficulty in a later line--and the mismatching of the moment is conveyed to the audience. Why? Because every little meaning indeed has a movement all its own. The reader's locus and the poem's locus are for the moment divorced, and the reader's locus becomes the more evident. That is why there is no substitute for the concentrated attention of the performer on the text being performed, moment by moment.

The pianist Artur Rubinstein said recently in an interview that he has learned much from listening to singers, and that he regrets that many pianists have not learned the way in which singers breathe--the breath in preparation for what is to follow, the holding of breath at a given moment, even the intake of breath at the end of a phrase are all part of the expressiveness of the body, and the pianist will do well to think of the piano itself as instrumental in demonstrating these bodily states. The pianist who simply plays from note to note, with correct time, is like the reader who gives us aloud a printed text but neglects its body.

As I intend it here, breathing is movement. A shift of the eyes is movement. A tensing of a hand, a shoulder, a thigh is movement. Indeed, the momentary cessation of visible movement may be extremely eloquent because it follows movement and precedes movement. In this sense it is itself a part of the total movement of the poem.

Movement may be stylized--in which case the body of the poem and the body of the performer are matched with a formal body of gesture in which in turn every little movement has a meaning all its own. Japanese classical drama, for example, shows us this. One may need to be in touch with the conventions of such gesture before he can comprehend the meaning. There is a language of gesture; some languages need to be

learned through a process of schooling, while others come effortlessly to us through our daily lives. But the effortless language of gesture in Japan or Russia or France may differ in eloquent ways from the language of my United States. The language of a Frenchman's shoulders is special; the language of the Japanese fan in motion is special; the language of the cowboy's holster and chaps is special. We are not all citizens of the world, though movies and television take us along that road.

The more languages of gesture one has at his disposal, the better prepared he is to be an interpreter of literature. No interpreter wants to be able to perform only one text, or the texts of only one writer or one geographical area, even though he may be best with one text or one writer or one area. He is best where he himself most fully matches the poem, but the ideal of education is to bring him to the condition where he matches as many poems as possible. He must be led out--educated. His return to self (if self can be said to exist for many of us) will constantly be a return to a different self, for each voyage away from the home of one's self makes that home, upon one's return, forever different. The decision to leave home is a decision to move. The French have a saying that to go away is to die a little--choice is always partly a matter of denying one action (a death of that action) for the sake of another action. As Robert Penn Warren puts it, in Brother to Dragons, "by the act we live, and in action die."

It is the journey itself which constitutes the poem--a journey which begins, continues through a middle, and comes to an end: an act, in short. Movement. Process. Becoming. The performer must not seem, in mid-journey, to seem to have stopped. Onward, onward, onward--that is what his movements must convey. Until the end comes.

Some poems are more overtly active than others. Some poems have big muscles; some poems leer; some poems show open anger; some poems weep; some poems breathe very quietly. The kind of movement employed by the performer must be the most significant for these movements of the poem. But my muscularity will not be identical with the muscularity of another reader; my anger will differ from his; my quietness will have its own shape. Hence my reading of a poem will never be identical

with that of another reader. This is the wonderful part of performance--that no matter how conscientiously each of us tries to match the poem, we will never--any two of us--create the same match. Rubinstein, watching the breathing of his piano, will never sound precisely like Rachmaninoff. We shouldn't want him to--for what would the world gain if each piano piece should sound precisely the same over and over and over again, no matter who the performer? Still, we should not be happy if the piece were unrecognizable! There are limits of tolerance in these variations in matching.

The teacher of performers has a task which is both delicate and sturdy. He must not kill off the student, but he must provide him with sufficient exercise to insure his growth and development. There is an art of performance as there is an art of archery or of swimming or of dance. All these arts require the careful use of the body. In each of them, there is meaning and purpose. In each there is movement. In each, every little meaning has a movement all its own. When the body of the archer or the swimmer or the dancer or the interpreter is perfectly in tune with meaning, one cannot (in Yeats's phrase) tell the dancer from the dance.

Movement is both ex-pressive and im-pressive. One may seek for the right movement to convey meaning; one may also in perception of the meaning find the movement. There is a reciprocity between text and performer. The interpreter is never to be seen as a carbon tracing of the form of a poem--a tracing to be conveyed about and exhibited as a "true copy." Meaning, for the interpreter, is not something contained wholly in the text prior to his conception of it. Meaning is constituted during the process of interpreting (whether silently or aloud). Meanings change. No matter how loyally one may try to "stick to the text," with any very complicated work of literature he is likely to find that that text changes over the years. What Hamlet "said" to the sixteenth century is not in any precise sense what it "says" to us. And if one can judge at all by historical accounts of acting, an eighteenth-century King Lear would move very strangely on our own stages. We are interested in historical perspectives, surely, but we should not like all past works

of literature to remain acts of the historical imagination. We do not want, for the most part, to look at seventeenth or eighteenth or nineteenth century poems; we want to feel them as they mean, and to respond to their movements.

It is interesting to watch different performers as they "engage" themselves with the poem before an audience. Some performers are very informal, in their own persons, with an audience, and their movement into a poem may be a pronounced change in tone. Other performers may establish the tone of the poem before actually touching it in performance. One reader may hold to the poem for a considerable period after finishing it; another may break abruptly back to his own person. Some kinds of poems endure many different kinds of "touch" by the performer; other kinds are damaged--even killed--by rough treatment.

The interpreter is constantly reaching out, reaching out, reaching out; the poem reaches out, reaches out, reaches out. The two bodies--not just "minds," but bodies--touch. The two become one. This is the poem incarnate, the poem made flesh--the reader made poem.

This kind of talk makes some people very nervous, of course. It sounds much too metaphysical. But in truth it is both metaphysical and physical. That is the truly splendid thing about the interpretation of literature in performance: it does not remain transcendent but actualizes. And the process of actualizing is a process of significant movement--movement which includes the movement of the mind, the movement of the body, the movement of the voice: total movement, though often at best minimal, so that the poem in performance is subjected to the ultimate pressure.*

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*The writer Roger Brown, in Words and Things (New York: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 197-198, speaks in a particularly meaningful way of the relationships between these various aspects of movement in describing the behavior of a child: The child's use of a "motor-noise" in playing with a toy car may later, combined with a whimper of desire, in the absence of the toy car mean "Give me my car." This, says Brown, is "the primal sentence frame." The subject--the child; the predicate--the whimper; the predicate object--the car. Crying, normally instrumental, becomes, with the noise of the car, referential. I am indebted for this reference to my former student, Kristina Minister.

One of my colleagues, Robert Breen, has recently suggested to us a course with the possible title "The Rhetoric of Social Behavior." Such a course would explore characteristic behaviors of individuals in societies. It would study the languages of gesture, broadly conceived. Twenty-five years ago, such a suggestion would, I think, have seemed old-fashioned--a throwback to outmoded psychologies. But the languages of gesture have once again become meaningful to us. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and various other students of human behavior (including "communication-ists," if one may be permitted that ugly word) have become interested in non-verbal behavior, and the relationships between verbal and non-verbal behavior. Non-verbal behavior may run parallel with verbal behavior or it may run counter to it. Actions may speak louder than words--and more truly. Between the two things there is interaction--in a word, movement. In the tensive relationship between the two, meaning resides. And hence I think that Mr. Breen is quite right in suggesting the usefulness to the interpreter of a course in the rhetoric of social behavior. It is not enough that the performer have a sense of his own behavior, since that behavior may not match the behavior of the poem very well. It is important that he be a student of behavior in general, including the behavior of poems. For poems behave. Language behaves.

It is often dispiriting (an excellent word!) to watch and to hear an inept performer tackle a complex poem--let us say, for example, the character of Macbeth in Shakespeare's play. The dagger which he sees before him is not Macbeth's dagger--no dagger at all, in fact, but a figment of the poet's imagination. Nothing in the way he plants his feet, looks with his eyes, grasps with his hand, utters words with his voice conveys the fact of that dagger in Macbeth's imagination. He may as well be seeing a pair of spectacles on a library table--might better be thought to see them, indeed. Not only the voice but the body must speak the dagger; only then does the play really come into existence.

But when the body speaks, the imagination is carried with it to any of those heights and depths on which the poem lives. I have not seen the performance of Macbeth at the Nissei Theatre in Tokyo at

which Tamasaburo Bando plays Lady Macbeth, but reports of his performance in the United States have made me want to travel to Japan to see him. Attempts by male actors in the United States and England to play female roles--as was done by the boy actors in Shakespeare's time--have usually met with failure or near-failure. The convention is not very fully alive for us. The mis-matching of male and female movement too often leaves us with the incongruous. The poem is crippled. But if reports in our newspapers are accurate, no such mis-matching occurs with Bando's performance. The San Francisco Chronicle for February 27 reports "There is not a single false note or stylized Kabuki gesture in his intensely human Lady Macbeth." The fact that Kabuki is vastly different from Shakespeare is kept meaningful. The onnagata of the Kabuki moves in his own way; Lady Macbeth moves in hers--and apparently Tamasaburo Bando moves with her. Clearly, no other Lady Macbeth will move in the same way. Lady Macbeth in Bando's performance is both his and Shakespeare's, Shakespeare's and his. The incarnation is composed of the tensive relationships between the whole movement of Bando and the whole movement of Shakespeare's poem.

The task of the teacher of interpretation is enormous, and endless--and wonderful. When the student and the poem tackle one another rather than love one another, the classroom can be a very dispiriting place; but when the match is made, when in deed every little movement has a meaning all its own, the effect is in the highest degree inspiriting. Whatever the truth may be about the rest of us, poems are not only made incarnate; they are capable of reincarnation.

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